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ABSTRACT

This policy statement developed on behalf of the Sharon (Massachusetts) public school system focuses on the need to decrease referrals for special education services, provide support to regular classroom teachers to adapt instruction for all students, and improve the effectiveness of the supplementary instruction provided to students with learning problems. Based on a commitment to the philosophy of equity in educational opportunities, 14 action steps are outlined. Among them are the following: use of pull-out programs as a last appropriate practice only after other options have proved ineffective; revision of the principal's role to include responsibility for all the students in his or her school; revision of job descriptions for special education and other specialists to include responsibility for working in regular classroom settings; development and implementation of a Student Support Team to receive student referrals and make intervention recommendations; expanded job description for the reading specialist; increased use of peer tutoring and cooperative learning practices; and conduct a study to determine the efficacy of alternatives to homogeneous grouping practices in grades 6, 7, and 8. References and a 3-year plan outlining the time frame for task accomplishments conclude the document. (JW)

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A POLICY FOR SYSTEMWIDE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE "REGULAR EDUCATION INITIATIVE"

PREPARED BY

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September, 1988

EC 212116

Sharon Public Schools
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Implementation of the "Regular Education Initiative"

Rationale:

There has appeared in the special education professional literature a significant number of articles that call into question traditional and current practices for identifying and educating students with learning problems (Gartner and Lipsky, 1987; Stainback and Stainback, 1984; Wang and Reynolds, 1985; Will, 1986). While there has been a general decline in enrollment of public school students, conversely, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of students identified as requiring special education and/or remedial education (Tenth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Education of the Handicapped Act, 1988). At present 17% of the school population in the Sharon Public Schools are receiving special education instruction outside of the regular classroom. Also, it is generally accepted that once a student has been identified as requiring special education and/or remedial education, it is likely that the student will continue to need such services throughout his/her educational career. This proposition is consistent when one investigates other support services, such as remedial reading, METCO tutoring and ESL instruction.

Traditionally, support services for students are provided outside of the regular classroom in what are called "pull-out programs." Students receive instruction that is often not compatible with the goals of the regular education curriculum. Because of scheduling limitations, students often miss valuable instruction that is being provided by the classroom teacher for the sake of "specialized" instruction, resulting in the student falling further behind his/her peers. "Pull-out" programs reinforce the concept of separate education instead of supporting the inherent goals of mainstreaming and the crucial role of the classroom teacher in educating all students (Gartner and Lipsky, 1987). There has been a tendency to supplant this responsibility of the regular classroom teacher in our zeal to educate students with learning problems.

The result has been an increase in the number of students who are referred for special education services. It is suspected that the process of a TEAM Evaluation and resultant placement in special education and/or remedial education is an affirmation of what is already known by the staff; the student in question is not achieving at acceptable levels in the regular classroom. Instead of studying the reasons for the basis of the referral, the student is identified as having a learning problem that can only be addressed outside of the regular classroom environment.

The problem that needs to be examined by both regular and special educators is what was the intent of the "Least Restrictive Environment" principle of P.L. 94-142; the federal statute that guaranteed equal educational opportunity for students identified to receive special education services. The situation that has evolved is one in which we have created a dual system of education. Regular education has been absolved of its responsibility towards the education of all students by the establishment and entrenchment of a core of special educators whose focus has been to propagate the "special" in special education; often without foundation and at great financial expense (Gartner and Lipsky, 1987).

Unless we re-examine our traditions and practices, this situation will only become exacerbated. We need to study ways in which we can decrease referrals for special education services, provide support to the classroom teacher in order to adapt instruction for all students, and change the manner in which students with learning problems receive supplementary instruction so that the intervention results in increased performance levels and improved self-esteem as competent learners. Current educational programs, curriculum and practices need to be examined and new ones identified that can lead to integrated regular classrooms.

Policy and Program Implementation:

Since any substantial change in our current practices directly impacts upon the school system's educational philosophy, there needs to be a commitment by the School Committee, administration, staff and parents to any change in

policy. What we will attempt to accomplish will be based upon valid research findings that are consistent with our belief system.

The central issue that we must deal with is that of equity in educational opportunities for students. It should govern the manner in which we treat students, select and implement educational experiences and develop curriculum. Equity challenges our concept of whether we subscribe to the philosophy that schools are a vehicle for ordering and controlling the economic and class structure of society or are the means by which we develop in students values that subscribe to the belief that all individuals can contribute to the maintenance of our democratic ideals. This fundamental doctrine influences our attitudes and actions with respect to the stigma attached to the effects of labeling atypical behavior. Thus, all constituencies need to understand the implications of any change, and the potential benefits that will derive for all students.

The following steps will be taken in order to reflect our philosophy for the education of all students:

(1) The policy statement of the Sharon School Committee supports the education of students with learning problems within the framework of the regular classroom. "Pull-out" programs for identified students will be considered as a last, appropriate practice after other options are proven to be ineffective for the student in question or unless it is determined otherwise by the Evaluation TEAM (Sharon School Committee, 1988).

(2) The principal's role will be revised to include responsibility for all students in his/her school. The roles of the Director of Pupil Personnel Services and Associate Superintendent of Schools will focus on being consultants, charged with the responsibility of providing the necessary resources for compliance with the policy adopted by the School Committee.

(3) The job descriptions of the special education teachers, speech/language therapists, reading teachers, METCO tutors and ESL tutors will be revised to include responsibility for working within the

regular classrooms with identified students and possibly, other students experiencing similar academic problems at the moment.

(4) The job description of the instructional aides will be expanded to not only include tutorial and small group instruction to identified special needs students in "pull-out" programs, but will now include assistance for students in the regular classroom as determined by the classroom teacher and Student Support Team.

(5) Each school will develop and implement a Student Support Team, comprised of the principal, referring teacher and support staff. The Student Support Team will be chaired by the principal or a regular education staff member. The Student Support Team will be afforded the responsibility of receiving referrals on students experiencing academic problems, and recommending classroom strategies, modifications and support services that can be implemented within the regular classroom, or if necessary, outside the classroom. If the latter is recommended, then appropriate measures will be taken to insure that there is on-going communication between the regular classroom teacher and support staff to insure compatibility of instruction.

The Student Support Team will, hopefully, reduce the need for a student to be referred for a TEAM Evaluation in accordance with P.L. 94-142 and Chapter 766. The Student Support Team role will not eliminate the rights of parents or staff to refer a student for a TEAM Evaluation, nor is the Student Support Team to be construed as a vehicle to exclude students from receiving special education services.

(6) The job description of the reading specialist will be expanded to include all communicative arts instruction. That is, these specialists will provide instruction in listening, speaking, writing, spelling, reading and study skills. Instructional emphasis will be placed on developmental rather than remedial education that is consistent with regular classroom curriculum practices and goals.

(7) The job descriptions of the department chairpersons at both Sharon Junior High and Sharon High School will be expanded to reflect responsibility for assisting staff within their respective academic departments to implement teaching strategies for students mainstreamed into the regular education program.

(8) Communicative arts and mathematics workshops will be established at both Sharon Junior High and Sharon High School. Based upon established criteria, students will be enrolled in these workshops on either a short-term or long-term basis from two periods to five periods per week. The staff will provide instruction that reinforces and/or supplements instruction being afforded in the regular classrooms. These workshops will address the fact that some students require additional time and practice to achieve mastery of the regular education curriculum.

(9) The Workshop Planning Committee will identify with the staff in-service programs for both regular education and support personnel that will emphasize effective teaching practices, instructional modifications and computer-assisted instruction.

(10) Peer tutoring, cooperative learning, co-teaching and the use of computer-assisted instruction will be explored as possible interventions recommended by the Student Support Teams for students who are experiencing problems within the regular classroom.

(11) A work-study program will be implemented at Sharon High School and will include "at risk" students.

(12) Early childhood programs will be expanded to include "at risk" students mainstreamed with regular education students.

(13) In order to diminish the "stigma" associated with present grouping procedures, remedial education and special education, a study will be conducted to determine the efficacy of alternatives to homogeneous grouping practices in grades six, seven and eight.

(14) An awareness program on equity issues will be developed and implemented for staff, students and parents.

Implementation Time Frame:

The adoption of this policy will require significant changes in our present attitudes and practices. To expect long-term positive effects, planning and implementation will extend over several years and at different rates at each school, depending upon the readiness and acceptance of the staff and parents to such changes. The following three year plan illustrates the tasks to be accomplished, and the time frame in which each will be undertaken.

Task	1988-89	1989-90	1990-91
Adopt School Committee Policy Statement	X		
Implement community and parent education	X	X	X
Conduct staff orientation to policy statement	X		
Adopt principals' revised job description	X		
Adopt department chairmen job description	X		
Revise support staff job descriptions	X		
Adopt revised support staff job descriptions	X	X	X
Adopt instructional aides' job description	X		
Identify staff development programs	X		
Implement staff development programs	X	X	X
Implement student support teams	X	X	X
Identify effective adaptive classroom practices	X	X	X
Identify effective classroom teacher-support staff partnerships	X	X	X
Implement work-study program	X		
Review grading practices	X	X	

Task	1988-89	1989-90	1990-91
Review classroom performance appraisal	X	X	
Review grouping practices in grades 6, 7, 8	X	X	
Implement communicative arts workshops	X	X	X
Implement mathematics workshops	X	X	X
Assess and revise policy implementation	X	X	X
Assess designated student outcomes	X	X	X
Assess staff attitudes towards policy	X	X	X
Assess parent attitudes towards policy	X	X	X
Assess student attitudes towards policy	X	X	X
Implement peer tutoring programs		X	X
Provide for computer-assisted instruction	X	X	X
Implement co-teaching classes	X	X	X
Implement early childhood programs for "at risk" students	X	X	X
Develop and implement equity awareness program for staff, students and parents	X	X	X

In conclusion, we need to recognize the enormous efforts put forth by our entire staff on behalf of students with divergent learning styles. Our conclusions regarding the effectiveness of our present educational models should in no way reflect upon the expertise of our staff, but should be viewed as a critical self-examination whose sole purpose is to improve upon the delivery of services to students. Legislation, regulation and litigation have contributed to the situation in which we now find ourselves mired. In adopting this policy we can now strive for excellence for all students, regardless of their diversity in learning styles. Thus, we will allow the staff the opportunity to put into practice sound, research based interventions.

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